



# Meal Observation Guide

The Meal Observation Guide is an important tool for child care directors, food service managers, reviewers, assessors, supervisors, and administrators to see if meal services are occurring as intended. Meal observation is a time in which you take a step back and simply observe a meal from start to finish. To observe, seat yourself in a chair or stand in a neutral place in the room.

Do not participate or interfere with meal service; it should carry on as usual. Be friendly and approachable because the children should feel comfortable. Interact with the children if they approach you, but try not to initiate. If you observe unfavorable behaviors do not correct the behaviors during the meal unless they're unsafe. This will increase the likeliness that you obtain a true picture of a typical meal service in which the staff and children feel relaxed and comfortable. It's preferred that you do not eat the food provided even if it's offered to you as this will ensure you keep a neutral position. Record your thoughts and observations throughout meal service. Use your observations and notes to compliment the food service staff on meeting the standard and rising above the expectations, and to make improvements where needed.

Meal observations include meal preparation, meal service, 2<sup>nd</sup> meal service shift, infants, and civil rights practices. The menu review, appendix 1, can be completed in addition to the meal observation guide to better evaluate food services. The attached form is a sample menu review form and many versions of this form are acceptable.

To answer the following questions below, mark Y for yes, N for no, and NA for not applicable.

## Meal Preparation (Stand out of the cook's way and observe the following)

\_\_\_ Are food safety standards being followed?

Examples include: hand-washing, glove use, hair restraints, single-use paper towels, correct heating or cooling temperatures, cross-contamination through cutting boards and utensils, washing items such as high risk fruits and vegetables, hazardous products sitting out at room temperature, food stored properly —off the floor and away from direct sunlight, cleaning supplies and medicines stored in a locked cabinet or out of the reach of children, and pets allowed in the kitchen.

\_\_\_ Are sanitation standards being followed?

For example, is the food preparation area clean and sanitized?

\_\_\_ Does the cook understand if the amount of food being prepared is sufficient to meet the minimum requirement for each food component?

\_\_\_ Do recipes exist and are they being followed by the cook?

\_\_\_ Are proper cooking, thawing, and cooling techniques being used to provide a safe and high quality meal?

\_\_\_ Is the cook preparing menu items from scratch?

\_\_\_ Are the correct cooking appliances/equipment being used to prepare and cook the food?

\_\_\_ If children are helping to prepare the meal, are they following safe procedures and/or closely monitored by an adult?

\_\_\_ If children are not helping to prepare the meal, are they allowed in the kitchen during meal preparation times and does the environment appear safe?

## **Meal Service:**

- ☐ Do the children wash their hands first before they sit down for the meal?
- ☐ Before the children sit down for meal service, are the tables clean and sanitized?
- ☐ Does the meal service begin on time?
- ☐ Is the meal served the same as is posted on the menu?
- ☐ If a substitution has been made, was it recorded on the posted menu?
- ☐ If some or all of the items are portioned, are the correct portions being given based on the meal pattern chart?
- ☐ Are food items placed in a serving bowl on the table for all children to help themselves?
- ☐ Do the adults sit and eat at the table(s) with the children?
- ☐ Are the adults encouraging conversation at the table?
- ☐ Is it a positive and encouraging feeding environment?
- ☐ Is the majority of children eating the food and does the food appear appetizing and smell good?
- ☐ Does the temperature of the meal seem appropriate for children?
- ☐ Is milk offered with the meal?
- ☐ Are the cup sizes large enough to provide a minimum of 6 oz of milk?
- ☐ Is the tableware suitable for the meal?
- ☐ Does the meal service appear to be a normal situation for the children or different from usual?  
For example, are the children making comments such as: "Why are we eating at the table today? We never ate this before? Why do we get milk today?"
- ☐ Is mis-feeding of any kind occurring?
- ☐ Was an adequate amount of food prepared to meet the minimum meal requirements?  
Is the amount of food sufficient to feed all children and adults in addition to having extras available for second helpings if requested?
- ☐ Are second helpings of food and milk offered to all children in a timely manner?
- ☐ Do children appear satisfied when the meal is over?
- ☐ Does the meal service feel rushed?
- ☐ Are table leftovers disposed of after the meal?
- ☐ Are the dishes properly hand-washed (i.e. washed, rinsed, sanitized, and air-dried)?
- ☐ Are the tables cleaned and sanitized after the meal?

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Meal Service Shift:**

- ☐ If there's a 2<sup>nd</sup> meal service shift, is there enough time in between shift to clean and sanitize the table(s)?
- ☐ Are the children eating at the 2<sup>nd</sup> meal service shift offered the same food items?
- ☐ Is there plenty of food for all children eating at the 2<sup>nd</sup> meal service shift?

**Infants:**

*The term, infant, in the CACFP refers to newborns less than 1 year of age. Infants should be fed on demand until they start eating table foods regularly.*

- \_\_\_ Are young infants held for feedings?
- \_\_\_ Are older infants seated in high chairs for feedings?
- \_\_\_ Are table foods appropriately modified for infants if necessary?
- \_\_\_ Are infants held when being fed from a bottle?
- \_\_\_ Is juice or any other sweetened beverage ever fed from a bottle?

**Civil Rights:**

- \_\_\_ Do the children sit at the table(s) together? Is there any separation of children? Is one child sitting at a table by him/herself?
- \_\_\_ Is there any separation through the assignment of eating periods (i.e. shift 1 or shift 2)?
- \_\_\_ For children with restricted diets, are they separated from the other children?
- \_\_\_ For children with feeding problem or concern, are they give the attention they need while not being isolated from the other children?

**Summary of the meal observation.**

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**Set realistic goals for improvement.**

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**Signature of Reviewer:** \_\_\_\_\_**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 1: Menu Review

\_\_\_ Is the current menu posted for parents to see?

View the posted menu and record the menu items for the meal observation.

Posted Menu	
Meat / Beans	
Bread / Grains	
Fruit / Vegetables	
Fruit / Vegetables	
Milk	
Other	

\_\_\_ Does the posted menu meet all of the required food components?

\_\_\_ Does the menu use creditable foods only?

\_\_\_ Does the menu offer variety?

\_\_\_ Is milk listed as a food component for every meal?

\_\_\_ Does the menu offer whole grain foods more often (i.e. breads, crackers, cereals, rice, pasta, etc.)?

\_\_\_ Is juice limited to once a week?

\_\_\_ Are menu substitutions posted on the menu?

\_\_\_ Do infant feeding schedules meet infant menu requirements?

\_\_\_ Are special dietary needs met, if there are any?

Summary of menu evaluation.

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Goals for menu improvement. List at least one priority going forward:

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Signature of Reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_